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ABSTRACT

This lesson for grade 12 is designed to increase student awareness of the debate surrounding flag burning, the proposed constitutional amendment to prohibit flag burning, and the constitutional issues involved, specifically the First Amendment. Students play the role of staff members for a U.S. Senator. They research the issue and prepare both pro and con responses for floor debate in the Senate. Students are provided with background information, detailed instructions, on-line resources, and reflection questions. The teacher's notes describe the unit's purpose, its correlation to history/social science and language arts standards, and adaptations for special needs students. (RJC)

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Schools of California Online Resources for Education (SCORE): Connecting California's Classrooms to the World

A Burning Desire: A Focus Group Turns Its Attention To Old Glory

12th Grade Lesson by David MacDonald

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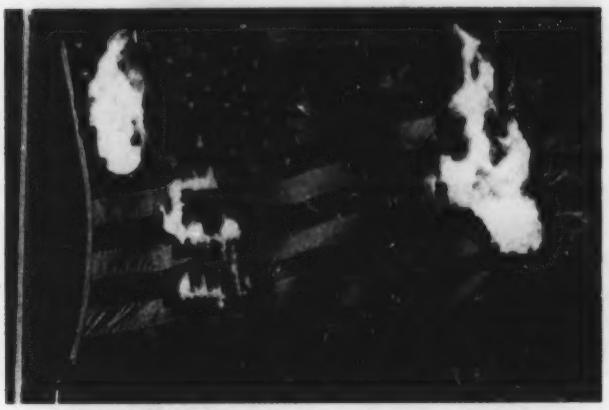

Photo from, "http://www.esquilax.com/flag."

Teacher Notes

A Burning Desire: A Focus Group Turns Its Attention To Old Glory

Americans from around the country have seen attacks on their beloved "Old Glory." Some feel pain and distress as they see the flag they once carried into battle being trampled, burned or damaged during an act of political protest. The situation has become so intense that there is a move to make another amendment to the Constitution, banning any and all forms of flag desecration especially burning of the flag. The issue of flag burning now falls under the First Amendment's guarantees of free speech and assembly. Various groups around the country oppose any amendment that would restrict "constitutionally protected" speech.

As is the case now in American politics, many controversial issues are brought before selected focus groups whose sole objective is to study and debate various policy issues and provide advice to their legislative representatives. This allows law makers to create political policies on controversial issues that allow plenty of input from their constituent voters so that, at election time, these voters will feel their views have been represented fairly.

As an aide to Senator Harney, you have been asked to gather a diverse focus group to provide input on the flag burning issue so the Senator will be prepared when a vote arises in Congress. The Senator expects you to solicit as many differing opinions within the state as possible. so that he can be certain that he represents his constituents on this controvsersial issue.

With a sigh of resignation that this will become one more example of an arduous series of emotionally charged meetings to manage, you begin the process of bringing this policy-recommending task force together. At first glance, it is obvious that you should include past veterans of the military as possible since this is often a fundamentally important issue to them. On the other side of the coin, you must also bring in members of groups like the ACLU who are champions of the First Amendment as it stands. You are smart enough to realize that it is important to solicit the opinions of your counterparts in the House who hail from your state and try to determine their level of support for the different perspectives. Lastly, you need to draw opinions from average citizens in order to get that 'man on the street'perspective on the issue.

After all the arrangements have been made, you put together the two positions all groups will consider (The Senator does support an amendment banning flag burning, or the Senator does not support a constitutional amendment regarding flag burning) and you wait for the results of the arguments to come.

The Task

As a member of one of the groups involved in this focus exercise, your job is to come up with an oral and a written response based on research you have collected to either support the Senator's position or rebuke him for selecting his position. The purpose of your job is to test the political winds. This will allow the Senator to maintain his office while still maintaining allegiance to the Constitution and its intent in this grey and controversial area of law. Depending on the persuasiveness of the arguments given by the focus subgroups, the Senator will formulate a position to advocate on the floor of Congress.

The Process

In your assigned groups, break up into pro and con subgroups so that each can research either possible position Senator Harney might take. Depending on the argument you pose, be able to defend it legally as well as emotionally. This will be a constitutional issue debated on the Senate floor with CSPAN cameras as well as Senate colleagues and opponents watching. As you move through your research, prepare your position both orally and in writing. You will need both when you present to the overall focus group. You should make use of any and all multimedia tools available for your presentation in the hopes that they might be used in the future by the Senator in his policy position.

Resources

http://www.fac.org/news/970930c-s.asp

http://www.nonline.com/procon/html/conflag.htm

http://webster.jb.okstate.edu/issues/1997_Spring/970225/stories/flag.html

http://scratch.abanet.org/media/flag-bush.html

http://www.linkline.com/personal/tedit/editorials/ed112697sm.htm

http://www.nonline.com/procon/html/proflag.htm

http://www.esquilax.com/flag

Learning Advice

Since this is a passionate issue, it is of paramount importance that you temper your emotions with the rational arguments on the issues. As you examine this issue based on the legal aspects, remember there is much passion and raw emotion in the "flag burning." It will help if you try to think of what the flag represents in people's minds and hearts. The Senator is counting on you to help him understand the feelings of his constituents as he attempts to address the constitutional questions.

Evaluation

You and your group members will be assessed on the evidence and how it is presented to the focus group. As a class, brainstorm the elements that must be present in a persausive argument and a clear presentation. Create a scoring rubric from these elements.

Many great ideas and points get lost in poor presentations and this is too important an opportunity to take lightly. Again, remember the power and importance of multimedia tools in persuading others on your arguments.

Conclusion

After you have completed your arguments to the focus group, you need to spend a few moments reflecting on the issue of flag burning and your own personal views surrounding it.

1. Based on what you have learned, do you feel that we as a country need a constitutional amendment to protect the flag?
2. In your opinion, is flag burning a First Amendment issue, and thus already covered by it?
3. Lastly, imagine you were eating lunch at school and a fellow student began to burn the flag on the school lawn. What would you do?

Teacher Notes

Grade 12 Units 2 and 5

Lesson Purpose - to expose students to an issue presently being debated and to alternative viewpoints as they begin to become active citizens.

Language Arts Standards Grades 11-12:

Reading Comprehension: Students read and understand grade level appropriate material. They analyze the organizational patters, arguments, and positions advanced. Writing Strategies: Students write coherent and focused texts that convey a well-defined perspective and tightly reasoned argument.Listening and Speaking: Students formulate adroit judgments about oral communication. They deliver focused and coherent presentations of their own that convey clear and distinct perspectives and solid reasoning.

History-Social Science Standards Grade 12:

12.2 Students evaluate, and take and defend positions on the scope and limits of rights and obligations as democratic citizens, the relationship among them, and how they are secured, in terms of 12.2.1 the meaning and importance of each of the rights guaranteed under the Bill of Rights and how each is secured 12.5 Students summarize landmark U.S. Supreme Court interpretations of the U.S. Constitution and its amendments in terms of the changing interpretations of the Bill of Rights over time. 12.6 Students evaluate issues regarding campaigns for national state and local elective office in terms of the means that citizens use to participate in the political process. 12.7.6 Students analyze and compare the powers and procedures of ... governments and the process of lawmaking at each ... level including the role of lobbying and media.

Historical and Social Science Analysis Skills Grade 9-12:

Historical Resarch, Evidence and Point of View

4. Student consruct and test hypotheses; collect, evaluate, and employ information from multiple primary and secondary sources; and apply it in written and oral presentations.

Historical Interpretation

1. Students show the connections, causal and otherwise, between particular historical events and larger social, economic and political trends and developments.

Adaptations for Special Needs Students:

Depending on your class size and language makeup, you may slow down, speed up or eliminate parts of this lesson to fit your students needs. This will be a particularly helpful lesson for students new to our country exposing them to the way public opinion can be made sometimes into law.

Cautions for the Teacher:

This is obviously a very controversial issue and much care should be taken when implementing it in your class. It is important for you not to seem biased toward any specific argument. Do this by stating and restating that the purpose of this lesson is to build understanding of the Constitution and the citizen's role in the political process when Constitutional interpretations are challenged. It would be wise to inform your school adminstrator in advance of assigning this activity.

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